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CIA chief Webster comes under fire as poor spy master

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WASHINGTON — CIA Director William Webster has been excluded from President Bush's war councils throughout the Persian Gulf crisis and is under attack by White House and congressional critics as an ineffective spy master.



Webster

Webster's detractors fault the quality of intelligence he has provided on Iraq and his overall management of the sprawling U.S. intelligence community, which encompasses the CIA and 11 other secret agencies.

The congressional intelligence committees have publicly criticized the way the intelligence agencies are managed, citing spotty analyses, overlapping and uncoordinated missions, and wasteful redundancies that cost billions. They are considering sweeping changes, including creating a new intelligence czar outside the CIA, relieving Webster of some of his powers.

"Webster is not a very important, visible or effective part of central intelligence," a White House official said. "He is not an intelligence matters person. In other administration circles, they could not think of a time when the nation's top intelligence official was so distanced from a major U.S. foreign policy crisis."

"The intelligence community is virtually rudderless," said Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., who served six years on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

"There's a great big ship out there, and there's nobody at the helm," said a senior Senate Intelligence Committee staffer.

Undercutting Webster's role as the president's chief intelligence officer is the fact that Bush, who ran the CIA in 1976, and his deputy national security adviser, Robert Gates, who was deputy CIA director from 1986 to 1989, consider themselves their own best intelligence officers, according to White House, CIA and congressional officials.

Several high-ranking administration officials, speaking anonymously, said Webster had been all but invisible during the Gulf crisis.

"I have not seen him at any important meeting since Aug. 2," when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the White House official said. "I find it unprecedented" that a CIA director would be so removed in a crisis, he said.

A State Department official characterized Webster, a former federal judge and FBI director, as intellectually unimpressive. "He's pathetic and weak," the official said. "He has a hard time completing a thought. He doesn't know what to do with the agency."

CIA spokesman Mark Mansfield strongly rebutted the criticisms.

"This is a director who's very much in charge," Mansfield said. "People who say he's not engaged don't have it right."

Mansfield said Webster "has a degree of access to the president that is unprecedented," based on Mansfield's estimate that Webster attends most of the president's 8 a.m. intelligence briefings.

"Judge Webster is at senior intelligence meetings that require intelligence input," the CIA spokesman said. "But some meetings are strictly policy discussions and these are occasions when he is not present."

Some White House policymakers say Webster provided fuzzy intelligence in the Gulf crisis last summer.

"I don't think we had good strategic intelligence at all" about Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's intentions last summer, Sen. David Boren, D-Okla., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said last week.

"There are gaps in our intelligence apparatus," said Specter.

A bill Specter introduced Tuesday would create a director of national intelligence to oversee every aspect of U.S. intelligence, including the CIA. "The DNI would be in charge of all intelligence agencies and setting policy as a result of what he sees," Specter said. The CIA director would be limited to running the CIA and any covert activities directed by the president.

"Bill Webster probably has done as well as anybody could, given the problems he faces, both structural and financial," Specter said. "But Bill Webster essentially speaks only for CIA, and everybody thinks that is so."

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